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AUTHOR McClain, Shirla; Spencer, Norma L.
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ABSTRACT

The black American female's social and economic status, family life and contributions to society have all suffered under the effects of racism and sexism. Racism in particular has had the greatest disabling effects on the status and progress of black women. The black woman has had to cope with problems dating back to slavery, the continuing emasculation of black males, and unique problems in childrearing. Myths about the black family and economic racism adversely affect the quality of life which she is able to provide for herself and for her family. From slavery until contemporary times the black female could make only limited contributions to society at large because of educational limitations and inadequate recognition from a dominant society. Even improving educational status has not insured social mobility. The unique set of circumstances surrounding the black woman's problems in American society demand that educators acquire certain knowledge, skills and attitudes for the education of her children. (EB)

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Racism and Sexism in America:
The Black Woman's Dilemma
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Shirla R. McClain
Kent State University

Norma L. Spencer
University of Akron

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Introduction

Background Information

For over 200 years American society has been stigmatized by racism and sexism. Until recently both issues have remained at an "insensitive" level of consciousness compared to the nation's priorities--poverty, peace, the energy crisis, space programs, inflation, etc. Yet both issues have surfaced sufficiently throughout America's history to have merited at least temporary solutions--solutions which have generally been appeasements until major disruptions occurred.

Following the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, however, such temporary solutions were no longer effective and racism and sexism emerged at so significant a level that society was forced to respond. Subsequently, both issues came to be viewed as those about which an enlightened population should be knowledgeable. Consequently sexism and racism have become curricular concerns in our present day schools.

Such long overdue attention to these issues has been applauded by the minority and female populations in America, for it is they who have been victimized by the social injustices and harmful practices of racism and sexism. These issues have been of particular and crucial importance to the 12,470,000 Americans who comprise approximately 6% of the total population--our nation's black females[1]

Studies of racism and sexism have generally been approached as separate entities that derive from a common cause--discrimination. Since the black American female has been doubly jeopardized by such discrimination, it seems appropriate that her position be studied from the interrelationship of sexism and racism and all of their inherent social, economic and educational implications, with an end toward understanding the multi-

faceted discrimination which has placed her at such a severe disadvantage in American society.

It is the purpose of this paper then, to examine the effects of both racism and sexism on America's black woman and to draw conclusions based on the priorities that must be addressed if the degradation of the black female is to be eradicated and the appropriate education of her children is to be implemented.

Racism and Sexism: Definitions and Dimensions

Blauner has defined racism as "a principle of social domination by which a group seen as inferior or different in alleged biological characteristics is exploited, controlled, and oppressed socially and psychically by a superordinate group".[2]

There are at least three types of racism operating in America: individual, institutional, and cultural racism. On an individual basis, a person who allows his behavior towards ethnic minority group members to be determined by stereotypic attitudes and beliefs he holds toward them is expressing racism.[3]

According to Terry, institutional racism is built into the institutional structures that dominate American society. As such it perpetuates racial injustice and can be overt or covert, intentional or unintentional in form.[4]

Cultural racism is operating when the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant cultural heritage is elevated to a position of superiority over ethnic minority groups' cultural experience, and Whites use power to perpetuate and impose their cultural heritage upon others. At the same time, the culture of ethnic minorities is being destroyed.[5]

Sexism is viewed as any attitude, or action or institutional structure which subordinates a person or group because of their sex.[6] With the stated definitions of racism and sexism in mind, the next portion of the paper specifies their effects on America's black woman.

The Black Woman in America: Victim of Racism and Sexism

In terms of social consequences and economic circumstances, the black American female has suffered dramatically because of racism and sexism. Her status, family life, and contributions to society have been devalued in a manner unknown to any other segment of the American population. An investigation of her problems follows.

Status

The Social Consequences of Racism and Sexism

The black woman's struggle has been unique in several ways. In addition to the normal problems based in sexism, her history has been marked by such pervasive racism that she has had multiple problems which originated in slavery and have continued to the present time.

Her first major problem was her sudden and tragic change in status. In contrast to the status of black women in contemporary America, their ancestral counterparts were revered and given relatively high status in Africa. Although the majority of America's female slaves came from the maintaining class, every stratum of African society was represented: some had been queens, princesses, artisans and warriors.[7]

Contending that women throughout the world had no easy life during this period of history, Bennett states that a great deal of evidence establishes the fact that women in Africa had, in general, a higher social status, before the white wall, than the white women of the West. Being

counsellors, lovers, friends, rulers, and traders, they were embossed in a network of stable institutions that provided security and order.[8]

Such stability, security, order, and high esteem were shattered and terminated by the institution of slavery. Thus, black women were relegated to such a lowly, subservient position that after more than 200 years they still are not viewed by the larger society as being worthy of high regard.

Economic Effects of Racism and Sexism

While there have always existed a very small number of black women who have been reared comfortably or who have married men who could provide them lives of leisure, the vast majority of black women have spent or will spend some portion of their lives in poverty.[9]

Yet the future for black women's economic status is beginning to be more optimistic, at least racially. In terms of income, data indicates that black women's salaries are growing closer to those of white females than black males are to their white male counterparts. Black females may achieve parity with white females in about ten years. Yet black males may not reach parity with white men for another 75 years.[10]

Such economic strides for black women are significant when one considers not only the depths from which the black woman rose, i.e., slavery, but also the fact that she was later in competition with white ethnic immigrants for jobs. In most cases the immigrants could obtain jobs more readily and usually blacks filled those positions when the immigrants vacated them to move upward.

While the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s brought about some significant changes and improvements for women, the black woman's economic status continues to be problematic. Being victimized by the practices of both racism and sexism, the black woman has generally been ascribed to a

lower socioeconomic status. A comparison of her income with that of white women, black men, and white men is examined in a later portion of the paper.

Family Life

Social Consequences of Racism and Sexism

A second major problem which resulted from the racism that existed during slavery was that it severely damaged the family life style of the black female making her womanhood totally different from that of her white counterpart. In addition to the ordinary problems inherent in family life--acquiring marital stability and rearing children--the black woman had a unique set of problems foisted upon her.

First of all, if she was allowed to marry, her husband and children could be taken from her--a psychologically destructive circumstance which robbed her of the essence of womanhood. Second, she had to bear witness to and suffer from the emasculation inflicted upon her husband and male offspring. Black men, unlike their white counterparts, could not offer their families the security nor the stability of protection.

Third, the black woman during slavery had to force herself to be submissive and to tolerate the degenerative sexual exploitation imposed upon her by her masters. Moreover, she had to discipline her children to acquiesce to the desires of whites, which meant the emasculation of her male children and the ominously inevitable rape of her daughters.

Such horrendous and bestial racist practices which were set into motion prior to the Civil War extended beyond the antebellum era. Although present racist practices are less physical and more covert, they nevertheless remain as vestiges of the racism that existed during slavery, and the black woman's life is more problematic because of such practices.

For example, she continues to see her black man emasculated (in more subtle forms); and her children must be taught to feel positive about their blackness in a predominantly white society. Such problems will be detailed more specifically later. It is important to note at this point, however, that although the larger society has not respected her struggle to overcome such a unique set of problems, the black family, the black community, and others who are knowledgeable about the black woman's plight, accord her the respect and high regard that she so rightfully deserves.

Present day emasculation of black males is evidenced in Coles' research. Reporting on the images of black fathers in America, he interviewed several black men to obtain their candid remarks regarding their beliefs and perceptions of themselves in American society. The subtle emasculation of black men--and their awareness of it--was evident in their conversations. Coles commented at length on the remarks of one black man who let him know that nothing was more appalling to him than the misconceptions he in his own way had noted that millions of people like Coles had about people like him. Stating that plain, ordinary guys like himself were to be found in apartment after apartment on one street after another, he posed the question, "But why, oh why, is it that a man like him, and all the other men he knows to be basically and at heart and in essence and fundamentally like him, never seem to catch the eye of people who talk about the black man?"[11]

Beyond the societal problems which are a cause for concern in the rearing of children, i.e., crime, drug abuse, etc., black parents have the additional responsibility of teaching their children to respect their racial identity in a white society. Racist remarks directed toward children constitute a significant problem for black families. Pinkney notes that the socialization of offspring becomes more difficult for blacks

because they must go beyond simply instilling skills, knowledge, attitudes and values in their children, they must also socialize their offspring into the peculiar status of being black in a racist society.[12]

Billingsley concurs, having stated seven years earlier that socialization is doubly challenging for the Negro family because the parents must teach their young not only how to be human, but also how to be black in a white society. Stating that the requirements for blacks and whites are not the same, he asks, "How does a parent impart a moral code to a child when they are surrounded by a socio-legal system which also upholds much of this same code, while violating at every turn their basic human rights?"[13]

Because all mothers are responsible for much of the socialization of their children, the problem of socializing blacks to be self-accepting in a white society frequently becomes one for which black mothers must assume responsibility.

Racism and sexism have also affected childrearing practices to the extent that the problems that attend racism and sexism have been partially responsible for many one-parent families. Literature, particularly that on black families, is replete with data on the debilitative effects of one-parent homes. While Hill recognizes that problems may exist in single-parent homes and cites Herzog's study that delineates such problems, he contends that because American society prefers two-parent families over one-parent families is no justification for assuming that all two-parent families function positively. Investigations have found many one-parent families which function better than two-parent families. Nye, Wasserman, and Herzog and Sudia are cited by Hill to support his contention and to indicate the weaknesses in some studies.[14]

In addition to the myth of the "pathological", single-parent black family, a second myth regarding "black matriarchy" has been espoused. It suggests that the black family is characterized by female dominance, i.e., the black woman is the authority figure within the family circle. Hill, however, dispels this myth with documented evidence to indicate that there exists an equalitarian pattern in most black families. Decision-making and household chores are shared by males and females.[15]

Such myths about the black woman serve only to compound the problems of self-esteem and childrearing she faces as a result of racism and sexism. Moreover, her status in society is discredited by such myths. The black woman has accomplished a great deal vis-a-vis overwhelming odds. Toiling under the oppressive forces of being black, female, and poor, the black woman in America has been relegated to a position of low status. Thus, she finds herself victimized by insidious forms of racism, sexism, and poverty which adversely affect the quality of life which she is able to provide for herself and her family. Contemporary black women then are viewed as "this nation's symbol of what it means to struggle to achieve under the most difficult conditions".[16]

Economic Effects of Racism and Sexism

The economic racism which has been imposed on black men is a modern version of the emascualtion begun in slavery. Such racism has forced many otherwise strong black men to rely upon their wives to work or to help them support the family. Thus, many black families consist of double earners. About two-thirds of the wives in black families work, compared to only half of the wives in white families.

While a working wife is essential to the survival of many black families or in keeping them out of poverty, contrary to popular belief,

the earnings of black women are significantly lower than those of black men.[17] Such meager incomes pose particular problems in rearing children and providing them with adequate food, clothing, housing, medical care, education, etc.

Moreover, economic circumstances may negatively influence academic achievement. An interesting analysis regarding the effect of 1) the presence or absence of both parents and 2) their employment status, upon children's attitudes toward self and their level of school performance was conducted by Gordon. He found that the most positive attitudes and highest performances were found in families with both parents present and the father working--regardless of whether the mother worked or not. The most damaging family situations were those where the father was present but not working--regardless of whether the mother worked--and where the father was absent and the mother unemployed.

Such findings were interpreted to mean that the relative economic security attached to alternative family structures explained the variations in children's self image and school success, and that the children who were the least successful as students were from families where the major breadwinner was not fulfilling the major requirement of that role.[18]

If the findings of this study are factual, then the crucial consequences of economic racism directed toward black men are apparent. For the black woman, then, childrearing is made even more complex when she must encourage her children to feel good about themselves and aspire to perform well in school in spite of living in economically insecure circumstances and/or being denied the presence of a breadwinner model.

The income levels of black women have made it difficult for them to support families or to substantially supplement their spouse's income.

Their economic status has always been low and most black women have historically worked in domestic or service jobs for low wages. Data on black and white male and female income reflect that in 1973 the median income of black women employed full time was approximately $3,000 less than that of white women: $4,465 for black women compared to $7,361 for white women. Black men earned $10, 365 compared to $14,055 fof white men.

The 1974 Bureau of Census figures indicate that median incomes for full time black female employees were $6,371 compared to $7,021 for white females and $8,075 for black males compared to $12,434 for white males. The 1975 Bureau of Census reports median incomes for blacks and whites who were employed full time as $5,866 for black women; $6,349 for white women; $8,172 for black men; and $11,827 for white men.[19] Although figures vary among sources, it is evident that black women are clearly at the lowest level economically.

Contributions to Society

Social Consequences of Racism and Sexism

A third problem for black women--from slavery to the present time--has been the devaluing of their specific contributions to society. The contributions of women in general, but black women in particular, have not received adequate recognition from the dominant society. Students have not been able to learn much about women's contributions because textbooks have been guilty of omitting, stereotyping, and/or distorting information about them.

Addressing the treatment of women in American history textbooks, the C.I.B.C. calls for the inclusion of women's contributions to the development of America. It declared that "women shared similar work experiences with men on farms, plantations, and in factories--in addition

to carrying the extra burden of traditional women's work. This reality is generally ignored in textbooks".[20]

Beyond these realities the black woman has had additional realities with which she had to deal--realities which are grossly neglected in textbooks. Her experience with the realities of enslavement caused her to become deeply involved in the antislavery movement. Black women were avid abolitionists who organized female antislavery societies and staged protests and boycotts in order to gain emancipation. The C.I.B.C. notes that although many black women were active social reformers in the late 1800s and early 1900s, textbooks omit mention of such black women.[21]

The women's liberation movement of the antebellum times grew out of the liberation struggle of blacks and certain tension existed between black female abolitionists and white suffragettes. Bennett asserts that the leaders of the White Suffrage movement were not sure of their priorities and tended, when under pressure, to confuse the black struggle for basic human rights with the women's struggle for an extension of human rights. Black female abolitionists had no such confusion and considered the abolition of slavery their first and only priority.[22]

From slavery until contemporary times the black female could make only limited contributions to society at large. Education, the ladder to success, was denied her in slavery and only in recent years (1974) have black females 21 years old and over obtained 11 years of schooling. Median school years completed for females over 25 is 12.2 for whites and 10.2 for blacks. Yet in spite of many limitations, the percentage of black women who are college graduates has doubled over the last 14 years. (These statistics, however, represent less that 10% of black women.)[23]

Beyond helping to build churches, her contributions have been made

largely in the areas of education, law, civil rights, social work and music.[24] If the black woman is to make more that what society considers "limited contributions" then her educational and economic opportunities must be greatly enlarged.

Economic Effects of Racism and Sexism

Historically, the contributions that the black woman has been able to make to the dominant society has been hampered both by her limited education and her restricted income. However, today's highly trained black woman is being sought for employment by industry, business, and higher education because she can fill two minority slots--race and sex. The black woman who is now well qualified can occupy positions that may allow her to make significant contributions to her race, sex, and society as a whole.

Yet, Pinkney points out the disadvantages of being black--male or female--in relation to earning power, stating that at all occupational levels blacks with comparable training and experience can expect to earn less than white workers. He cites data to indicate that: 1) the Negro who has attended (but not completed) college earns less than the white with only eight years of elementary school; and the Negro college graduate earns but slightly more than does the white high school graduate; and 2) that black men with some high school education earn less than whites with less than an eighth grade education.[25] Pinkney concludes then that for blacks simply improving educational status does not insure social mobility. He argues that being black takes precedence over whatever other attributes one might possess.[26]

Thus, because of economic racism, the educational level of blacks does not render them as able to make contributions to society as their

white counterparts. Black women who must invest much of their energy being employed and rearing children have little time to devote to making what society deems significant contributions.

Summary, Conclusions and Educational Implications

This portion of the paper will summarize the data presented, set forth conclusions, and examine the educational implications of those conclusions.

Summary and Conclusions

America's black woman has had to undergo untold suffering because of the emasculation of black men; the diminishing of self-pride in her children; and the low esteem ascribed her by the larger society. Moreover, the problems of economic racism imposed upon black men have become inextricably bound with and oftimes caused economic problems for black women. Therefore, the writers conclude that racism with all of its insidious and dehumanizing implications has been more devastating to the well being of the black woman than the disabling effects of sexism.

Black women during slavery were forced to discipline their children to acquiesce to the desires of whites and traditionally black parents--mothers in particular-have had the very difficult task of socializing their children to be self-accepting in a white society. Moreover, many myths about black families have compounded the problems of childrearing for the black woman.

Therefore, the writers conclude that the mere fact that black adults--having evolved from children--have been able to physically, economically (if only barely), emotionally, and psychologically survive in a society seemingly dedicated to their incapacitation, is a living testimonial to the black woman.

An examination of the black woman's status, schooling, and salary

reveals that: 1) the black woman, under slavery, lost the stability, security, order and high esteem that was accorded her in the African society; 2) her educational status has lagged behind her white counterpart (Only recently has the black female 21 years old or older obtained 11 years of schooling) and 3) the black woman's income is lower than white females or men in general, black or white. Based on the data, the writers conclude that the black woman in America has been relegated to the lowest rung of the ladder--socially, educationally, and economically.

Beginning with a history of enslavement, sexual exploitation, poverty, and no education, the black woman has managed to become active in social reform movements; has helped to establish churches; and has followed aesthetic, educational, civic, and social pursuits. Her educational attainment indicates that although less than 10% of black women are in college, the percentage has doubled in a 14 year span. Furthermore, the contemporary black woman who is highly trained has unprecedented opportunities to fill occupations that allow her to make significant contributions to her race, sex, and to the larger society.

Therefore, the writers conclude that the black woman's progress in matters of social adjustment, education, economics, and contributions have been monumental compared to her beginnings in America.

Educational Implications

The unique set of circumstances surrounding the black woman's problems in American society demand that educators acquire certain knowledge, skills, and attitudes for the education of her children. The educational implications derived from conclusions based on the literature follow.

First, since racism appears to be more disabling than sexism for the black woman, it is necessary to eliminate those factors that contribute

to racism. Therefore, it is the obligation of educators to become knowledgeable about black history and the totality of the problems of black families rather than simply being aware of or acquainted with the black families with whom they work. Such knowledge requires, then, that educators also take a positive philosophical position on educating black youth.

Second, because of the debilitating effects of racism, the socialization of black children is even more problematic than for majority children. Teaching black children to accept themselves and others who are unwilling to accept them becomes an arduous and monumental task. The educators' responsibility, then, is similar to that of the parents. This means that educators must become an ally to black families. Since socialization of children implies instilling in them human qualities, the modeling role of the educator--showing acceptance and "being human"--is crucial.

Third, although racism is responsible for the black woman's being assigned to a low status in society--economically, educationally, and socially--the evidence clearly indicates that she has neither earned nor should be relegated to such low assignment. Because her different set of experiences have educational implications for her children, educators must understand that the different experiences that black children bring to school are not deficiencies. Furthermore, educators must also understand that when they don't find what they expect, they can not assume that something is missing. Instead, they must realize that something else--something different--is present.

Finally, despite the aforementioned problems that the black woman has encountered and continues to experience, her progress has been monumental when compared to her beginnings in America. With little help, she has struggled and overcome many of the societal handicaps that have been

placed upon her. Thus, educators must view her as a strong, vital force moving in a positive direction. It is the responsibility of educators, then, to reach out and acknowledge her positiveness in unprecedented ways--ways that allow her to recognize her own self worth. For once she can recognize her own worth, she is better able to instill positive self concepts in her children.

Epilogue

The writers' final comment regarding America's black woman states summarily that in terms of developing and salvaging her own humaneness and humanness; maintaining emotional, psychological, and oftimes financial support of her socially disenfranchised black man; and striving to socialize her children to be human in a society which has historically treated its black citizens in an inhuman manner, the black American woman has etched an unparalleled place in history.

Footnotes

[1] U. S. Bureau of Census, A Statistical Portrait of Women in the United States (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1978), pp. 15-16, 21-22.

[2] Robert Blauner, Racial Oppression in America (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 84.

[3] Geneva Gay, "Racism in America: Imperatives for Teaching Ethnic Studies," in Teaching Ethnic Studies, ed. James A. Banks (Washington, D. C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 43rd Yearbook, 1973), p. 31.

[4] Robert W. Terry, For Whites Only (Grand Rapids: Eerdman's Publishing, 1970), pp. 62-63.

[5] Gay, "Racism in America", p. 33.

[6] The Council on Interracial Books for Children, Stereotypes and omissions in U. S. History Textbooks (New York: Author, 1977), p. 134.

[7] Lerone Bennett, Jr., "No Crystal Stair: The Black Woman in History," Ebony, August 1977, pp. 164-165.

[8] Ibid., p. 164.

[9] Joyce Ladner, "The Black Woman Today," Ebony, August 1977, p. 36.

[10] See Alphonso Pinkney, Black Americans, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 93, and Ladner, "Black Woman", Ebony, August, 1977, p. 34.

[11] Robert Coles, The South Goes North, vol. 3 of Children of Crisis (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1971), p. 166.

[12] Pinkney, Black Americans, p. 108.

[13] Andrew Billingsley, Black Families in White America (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 28-31.

[14] Robert B. Hill, The Strengths of Black Families (New York: Emerson Hall Publishers, 1972), pp. 22-23.

[15] Ibid., pp. 18-20.

[16] Ladner, "Black Woman", Ebony, August 1977, pp. 34-36.

[17] Hill, Strengths of Black Families, pp. 11-13.

[18] Sarane Boocock, An Introduction to the Sociology of Learning (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), p. 72.

[19] See Ladner, "Black Woman", Ebony, August 1977, p. 34; Marquis Academic Media, Sourcebook of Equal Educational Opportunity, 2nd ed., (Chicago: Author, 1977), p. 11: U. S. Bureau of Census, Current Population Reports, P 60, No. 111 (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1978), pp. 15-16, 21-22.

[20]The Council on Interracial Books for Children, Stereotypes and Omissions (New York: Author, 1977), p. 103.

[21]See Bennett, Ebony, August 1977, p. 168; The Council on Interracial Books for Children, Stereotypes and Omissions, p. 115.

[22]Bennett, Ebony, August 1977, p. 168.

[23]See Ladner, Ebony, August 1977, p. 35; Pinkney, Black Americans, p . 74.

[24]Reference Library of Black America, vol. IV (New York: Bellwether Publishing, 1971), pp. 197-221.

[25]Pinkney, Black Americans, p. 94.

[26]Ibid., p. 96.